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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPKO

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: SENIOR MOROCCAN OFFICIAL UPBEAT  
FOLLOWING WASHINGTON VISIT

REF: RABAT 1979

Classified by Ambassador Thomas Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an October 27 telephone conversation, Minister Delegate Fassi Fihri told the Ambassador the GOM was upbeat on the status of the Western Sahara process following the visit of a senior Moroccan delegation to Washington earlier this month. Fihri seemed resigned to continuing Algerian and Polisario "intransigence" on the principle of autonomy as a way forward in the dispute but asserted confidently that support for the Polisario among Sahrawis was as little as 25 percent. We do not know where this statistic came from, but the GOM's citation of it begs the question as to why the Moroccans are so adamantly opposed to the referendum recommended in the 2004 Baker Plan. End summary.

¶2. (C) During an October 27 telephone conversation with the Ambassador, Taieb Fassi Fihri, Minister-Delegate for Foreign Affairs, was upbeat following the recent visit he and a high-level Moroccan delegation had made to Washington (and other capitals - reftel) to discuss Western Sahara. Fihri told the Ambassador that he took from consultations with senior U.S. officials that "if we convince you" of the GOM's sincerity in presenting a meaningful autonomy plan, the U.S. would respond in kind by embracing autonomy as the "plan of record" and would work to convince other international actors that this approach was the best way forward. The Ambassador noted to Fihri that during his recent visit to the U.S. he, Ambassador Ford, and A/S Welch had discussed the Western Sahara problem and all were resolved to work closely with the parties to advance a negotiated solution.

¶3. (C) Fihri implied resignation that Algeria would remain intransigent in its insistence on a referendum, but asserted that Morocco "would not remain hostage to the (Algerian) domestic political calendar," an apparent reference to President Bouteflika's health and the view that Algerian support for the Polisario will continue as long as he remains in office. Continuing on this theme, Fihri asked the Ambassador rhetorically what would happen if the Polisario (and Algeria) rejected autonomy. "This is why we have to go the local population first," he stated, referring to consultations on autonomy the Royal Commission on Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS) is conducting with the public in Western Sahara. (Note: Influential members of the Sahrawi public have told us they are not impressed with this consultation process and question the legitimacy of CORCAS. See Rabat ¶1983. End note.)

¶4. (C) Fihri asserted that the Polisario draw support from "less than 25 percent" of the population in Western Sahara and made an oblique reference to growing support for autonomy from "Sahrawi refugees currently outside the debate." Pressed for clarification, Fihri told the Ambassador he was referring to Sahrawis living in Spain who were disillusioned

with the Polisario leadership.

15. (C) Comment: The origin of Fihri's "25 percent" statistic is unclear but the GOM should be circumspect about deploying it, since it begs the question of why Morocco is so adamantly opposed to a referendum on the Western Sahara's future that includes any mention or possibility of independence. If the Polisario's support among Sahrawis is as shallow as Fihri asserts (and we doubt that it is), the GOM would have nothing to fear from the plan proposed by James Baker in 2004. End comment.

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Riley